

## IT IS CLAIMED:

1. A method for conditioning the skin, comprising: applying topically to the skin a formulation comprising an extract of an *Astragalus* or *Cimicifuga* species in a cosmetic  
5 vehicle.
2. The method of claim 1, wherein the species is an *Astragalus* species selected from the group consisting of *A. membraneus*, *A. trojanus*, *A. zahlbruckneri*, *A. brachypterus*, *A. microcephalus*, *A. peregrinus*, *A. caprinus*, *A. melanophrurius*, *A.*  
10 *oleifolius*, *A. trigonus*, *A. spinosus*, and *A. verrucosus*.
3. The method of claim 1, wherein the species is a *Cimicifuga* species selected from the group consisting of *C. racemosa*, *C. dahurica*, *C. foetida*, and *C. acerina*.
- 15 4. The method of claim 2, wherein the species is *Astragalus membranaceus*.
5. The method of claim 4, wherein the extract is from the root of the plant.
6. The method of claim 4, wherein the concentration of said extract in said  
20 formulation is from 0.1 to 100% (w/v).
7. The method of claim 6, wherein said concentration is from 1 to 50% (w/v).
8. The method of claim 7, wherein said concentration is from 5 to 25% (w/v).  
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9. The method of claim 1, wherein the vehicle further comprises one or more additional ingredients selected from the group consisting of an emulsifier, a thickener, and a skin emollient.
- 30 10. The method of claim 9, wherein the formulation comprises one or more ingredients selected from an emulsifier and a skin emollient.

11. The method of claim 10, wherein the formulation comprises a skin emollient.

12. A method of increasing telomerase activity in a cell or tissue, comprising contacting said cell or tissue with a composition comprising an extract of an  
5 *Astragalus* or *Cimicifuga* species.

13. The method of claim 12, wherein the species is an *Astragalus* species

14. The method of claim 13, wherein the species is selected from the group  
10 consisting of *A. membranaceus*, *A. trojanus*, *A. zahlbruckneri*, *A. brachypterus*, *A. microcephalus*, *A. peregrinus*, *A. caprinus*, *A. melanophrurius*, *A. oleifolius*, *A. trigonus*, *A. spinosus*, and *A. verrucosus*.

15. The method of claim 14, wherein the species is *Astragalus membranaceus*.  
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16. The method of claim 13, wherein the species is a *Cimicifuga* species selected from the group consisting of *C. racemosa*, *C. dahurica*, *C. foetida*, and *C. acerina*.

17. The method of claim 15, wherein the extract is from the root of the plant.  
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18. The method of claim 12, further comprising the step of, prior to said contacting, identifying a cell or tissue in which an increase in telomerase activity is desired.

19. The method of claim 18, wherein said identifying comprises diagnosing a  
25 condition in a patient which is subject to treatment by an increase in telomerase activity in cells or tissue of the patient.

20. The method of claim 19, wherein said condition is HIV infection or a degenerative disease.  
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21. The method of claim 20, wherein said degenerative disease is selected from the group consisting of a neurodegenerative disease, a degenerative disease of the bones or

joints, macular degeneration, atherosclerosis, and anemia.

22. The method of claim 19, wherein said condition is a wound or other acute or chronic condition of the epidermis.

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23. The method of claim 19, wherein said contacting comprises administering said composition to the patient.

24. The method of claim 12, wherein said cells are explant cells obtained from a patient, and said contacting is done *ex vivo*.

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25. The method of claim 12, wherein the concentration of said extract in said composition is from 0.1 to 50% (w/v).

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26. The method of claim 25, wherein said concentration is from 0.25 to 25% (w/v).

27. The method of claim 23, wherein said extract is administered orally in solid form, exclusive of vehicle.

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28. Use of a composition comprising an extract of an *Astragalus* or *Cimicifuga* species for the manufacture of a medicament for treating a condition subject to treatment by increasing telomerase activity in a cell or tissue.

29. The use of claim 28, wherein the species is an *Astragalus* species

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30. The use of claim 29, wherein the species is *Astragalus membranaceus*.

31. The use of claim 28, wherein said condition is HIV infection or a degenerative disease.

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32. The use of claim 28, wherein the condition is a chronic or acute condition of the epidermis.

33. A cosmetic composition comprising an extract of an *Astragalus* or *Cimicifuga* species in a cosmetic vehicle. |

34. The composition of claim 33, wherein the species is an *Astragalus* species.

35. The composition of claim 34, wherein the species is selected from the group consisting of *A. membranaceus*, *A. trojanus*, *A. zahlbruckneri*, *A. brachypterus*, *A. microcephalus*, *A. peregrinus*, *A. caprinus*, *A. melanophrurius*, *A. oleifolius*, *A. trigonus*, *A. spinosus*, and *A. verrucosus*.

36. The composition of claim 35, wherein the species is *Astragalus membranaceus*.

37. The composition of claim 33, wherein the species is a *Cimicifuga* species selected from the group consisting of *C. racemosa*, *C. dahurica*, *C. foetida*, and *C. acerina*.

38. The composition of claim 33, wherein the extract is present at a concentration of at least 2.5% (w/v).

39. The composition of claim 33, wherein the extract is present at a concentration of at least 5.0% (w/v).

40. The composition of claim 33, wherein said vehicle comprises at least one ingredient selected from the group consisting of an emulsifier, a thickener, and a skin emollient.

41. The composition of claim 40, wherein the formulation comprises one or more ingredients selected from an emulsifier and a skin emollient.

42. A method of selecting an extract which is effective to increase telomerase activity in cells, comprising testing a plant extract for telomerase activation, in a TRAP assay of keratinocytes or

fibroblasts, and

selecting the extract if it is effective to produce a level of telomerase activity, at a concentration of 25  $\mu\text{g/ml}$ , at least 50% greater than that produced by a solvent control.

5      43. The method of claim 42, wherein said plant is a flowering vascular plant.

44. The method of claim 43, wherein said plant is an herb.